

Committee Secretariat
Parliament of Australia
Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations

Re: Inquiry into the education of boys

The Early Childhood Association of New South Wales Inc. is an association that represents early childhood educators across all educational systems. The organisation's vision:

“The promotion of child centred practices through advocacy and professional development, informing on current trends in early childhood education and ensuring a high profile for early childhood issues.”

As teachers with many years experience of teaching children in the early years (ages 5-8) of school we offer the following comments to the committee's inquiry.

- ❖ The Early Childhood Education Council (ECEC) believes that young boys receive contradictory information as they construct their masculinity. On the one hand in the public world of school and public policy, boys experience equality of outcomes regardless of gender. This includes a model that is unaccepting of aggression and also means negotiating a satisfactory solution to conflict and modification of their more assertive tendencies. However, in the daily interactions with family, peers, sporting groups and the media they receive contradictory images where traditional attributes of masculinity are not only expected but elevated. This contradiction must bring confusion to young boys as they are continually confronted by these mixed messages.
- ❖ Both young boys and young girls enter formal schooling with great enthusiasm and some apprehension, but with a belief that they will learn to read and write. They come with some assumptions about how they should behave, and often preconceived ideas about what it is to be masculine and what it is to be feminine. In Kindergarten, it doesn't take many days before girls know which coloured pencils are for them and which colours are “boys colours”. Teachers in all years of school find that they are spending more time responding to boys demands as they seek to dominate class time, eg seeking attention or not paying attention and not being ready for work. For boys this means they frequently perceive themselves as being 'rewarded' when they engage in acting out behaviour.
- ❖ The playing areas in the playgrounds are also quickly taken over for boys' games and girls are left to the side lines to play more passive games while the boys run around and play a variety of ball games. This seems to occur and is assumed to be

the accepted practice and the unspoken culture that is passed down through siblings or neighbours and becomes the norm. Some schools have sought solutions such as roster systems for the use of equipment and games areas allocating times for girls and boys separately and/or for younger or older classes. Many schools have established non-sexist practices but these have not brought about long term institutional change, eg schools that do not designate a girls and boys line when children line up, find children will often by Year 2 (age 7-8) put themselves into single sex lines.

- ❖ Schools generally reward on task behaviour and quality communication, which is not behaviour often evident in young boys in the early years of school. This can be for a number of factors, including “school readiness”, inappropriate teaching or classroom management strategies. Good early childhood teachers use strategies that incorporate that more experiential hands-on learning, shown by research to be an effective learning strategy for boys as it builds on their learning experiences they bring to school.

- ❖ This has an impact on the young boys for there continues to be a different expectation and “set of messages” for boys in their school and home environments. School rewards on task behaviour and quality communication. In the early years there is an emphasis on the acquisition of expressive and receptive language skills as these are the important components in the acquisition of reading. There have been media reports of published research that propose this is not learning that complements boys’ primary developmental strength. There is a perception in the community about schooling and this is passed on to young boys. They are told by the community that when they go to school they will be expected to be passive recipients who learn to “read, write and do arithmetic and not be naughty” This historically prevailing attitude does not enamour children to school and when they are faced with the reality of teacher expectations the conflict begins.

- ❖ Many teachers continue to question why gender stereotyping persists even when strategies have been implemented to discourage segregation and monopolisation of teacher time and play areas. In the school environment there has been recognition of the different learning needs of boys and girls. These have resulted in a vast range of policies developed by both government and the NSW education system and implemented in schools through changes to curriculum and school practices. School-based gender equity programs achieve success when they are supported by a total commitment of staff and parents who communicate these expectations to the children. Where these successful gender equity policies are implemented they are supported by a total commitment of staff and the expectation is transferred to the children. However, these types of programs can flounder if teachers have limited understanding of the intended outcomes of the programs, thus are less able to be consistent in their approach to implementation.

- ❖ Home and the social milieu, in many cases, promote sporting activities for young boys while their sisters and other females participate in dance and physical culture/fitness activities that are not acknowledged as sport but as arts performance. Families often actively support and attend Saturday football and other sports with the sons, but not share the same attendance with daughters. This can also be seen in the promotion of masculine sports in the media. Weekend television and radio devote far more airtime to boys' sport than those of girls. This reinforces the dominance of male culture.

- ❖ While boys perceive themselves in an ascendant role in society, the reality of school for boys is that 60% of them are in special needs classes, they are over represented in reading and behaviour intervention classes and they are predominantly the children who experience speech and language delays. There is now a great deal of evidence to suggest that in the early years of boys' education the teaching needs to be explicit. This means that learning must be relevant and frequently modified based on close teacher observations. The learning program needs to be developmentally appropriate. It must encompass engagement with the learning, experimentation and experience and be delivered over time. For all children, their learning needs are determined by assessment, which builds on prior knowledge. It is essential that in the first years of school, teachers ensure the children really acquire the foundational skills, knowledge and understanding that will assist them become life long learners. An example of an effective program is the NSW *Count Me in Too* which focuses on the individual needs of children through assessment to identify the appropriate teaching step. A feature of this program is the training and development support provided by district mathematics consultants reinforcing the evidence that any change must be supported with training. With the increasing focus on technocy and numeracy, teachers need to ensure that the learning is centred in best practice.

- ❖ School literacy programs need to be appealing to young boys. Programs need to be supported with a variety of text types available through reading schemes and literature based programs. Intervention programs need to have reading materials, which are relevant to the students' interests and will enhance their self-esteem. Many boys learn what is taught but do not adopt inferential learning. Teachers need to have clear understanding and knowledge of the specific teaching strategies that best match boys' preferred learning style, i.e. the designing and making, hands-on approaches to learning. Teachers should be "up-front" about what outcomes are expected from the learning. Experience shows that the selection of texts for teaching reading need to be carefully chosen if boys are to be engaged in the reading process, eg the recent interest in the Harry Potter books show that if the text is right boys will read as eagerly as girls.

- ❖ Finally the way in which children are grouped has an impact on the learning that takes place. It is important to train children how to work in collaborative and cooperative groups, to clearly articulate the role of each person in the group to ensure that the role they have is a match with their preferred way of learning.

Concluding Comments

ECEC believe it is important that the committee addresses and discusses strategies that make explicit the need for homogeneous masculinity to be challenged and replaced within a framework of equity. This is not to argue for a level playing field as different groups, including girls and boys, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students in rural or remote areas and students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties have different needs and therefore make different demands on the educational process.

Frequently, forces that are external to either the school or the classroom drive curriculum delivery, hence the inclusion in the curriculum of additional learning imposed e.g. drug education, children protection, road/water safety programs. Whilst acknowledging the importance of accountability within the education sector there needs to remain a clear focus on learning and what comprises best practice in the early years of schooling. Paper tests can only provide a certain type of information, and yet results from these external paper tests have a significant impact on teaching and learning and the support services available to schools. Our submission has previously highlighted the importance of oracy skills in developing literate students and yet at the age of eight students are expected complete a written assessment of literacy and numeracy skills. (Basic Skills Testing).

There would appear to be a need to include a set of identified generic skills which are competencies, the life tools required of our children to help them engage with the educational process to become life long learners. Skills, such as communication, research, critical thinking, problem solving, task management, technology skills and cooperative group skills are all competencies that children need to develop to use in all areas of the curriculum.

We are pleased to provide this submission in the hope that it will contribute to your discussion about what is significant in boys' first years of school. We would be happy to send a delegation to meet with the committee to provide further information. ECEC can be contacted on 9567 5819 or at PO Box 418, Leichhardt, 2040.

Yours faithfully,

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